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HISTORIAN

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OF HANCOCK COUNTY

Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi

July 2009

COMING EVENTS AT LOBRANO HOUSE

The June luncheon meeting will be held on Thursday, July 16, 2009, at noon at the Kate Lobrano House. The speaker will be Dr. Doug Bristol of the University of Southern Mississippi, who will speak on the oral history he's been conducting on the 100 Men Hall. **Reservations are required** and may be made by calling 467-4090. Please call **by noon on Wednesday, July 15**, to make your reservation, to help us plan seating which is limited to forty-five people, and to apprise Michelle of the number for whom to prepare. The price of the lunch is \$8.00.

ANNUAL CEMETERY TOUR

Even though October is still several months away, it's not too early to begin thinking about and planning the Hancock County Historical Society Annual Cemetery Tour. It will be held on Halloween night, Saturday, October 31, 2009, at Cedar Rest Cemetery on Second Street. We will need volunteers to help prepare the cemetery for the tour (mark the path, etc.), to portray citizens buried there, to act as guides, and to serve at the Lobrano House.



Robert E. Jones Hall
Gulfside Methodist Assembly

Gulfside Methodist Assembly

By Scott Bagley

We close our series on historic churches in Hancock County by taking a look at a Waveland beach landmark—the Gulfside Methodist Assembly. This property's history began in 1923 when Bishop Robert E. Jones of New Orleans became the first black bishop to be elected as General Superintendent of what was then the Methodist Episcopal Church. Almost immediately following his appointment, Bishop Jones began work on his long-held dream,

the establishment of a religious resort for blacks in the South.

Bishop Jones, with the help of churches, individuals and "penny clubs," raised approximately \$4,000 to buy and lease more than six hundred acres, much of it facing the Gulf of Mexico in Waveland. Many people then and now wondered how an African-American man could acquire beachfront property during the height of Jim Crow. It has been surmised that because Bishop Jones was fair skinned sellers mistook him for white.

There was but one building on the acquired property—the so called Jackson House as it had once belonged to the adopted son

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OF HANCOCK COUNTY

Eddie Coleman, Editor
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of Andrew Jackson. This once magnificent mansion was filled with large rooms and stood some eight to ten feet above the ground and the first floor had a porch wide enough for meeting space. The space underneath had provided comfortable shelter for the cows and hogs that roamed the nearby forest. The house itself could not be seen from the beach as large oak trees surrounded the building, hiding it from view.

With the help of fourteen other ministers and local craftsmen, Bishop Jones set about putting the deteriorating structure back into living condition. The bottom area was eventually closed in to become a kitchen, dining room and sweet shop. An additional building was added as well as a screened pavilion with a dirt floor. The immediate grounds were cleaned and a plat was laid for a tennis court. There was a makeshift dirt road leading to the Jackson house area, but when it rained, the road

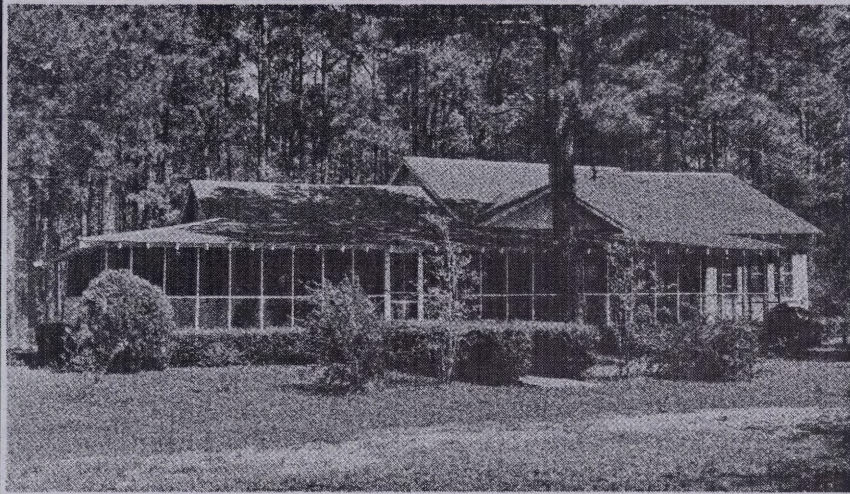
flooded and turned to mud forcing visitors to walk about three miles through the woods from the train station. Originally called Gulfside Chautauqua and Camp Meeting Ground, the property was dedicated as the Gulfside Methodist Assembly on August 31, 1927.

The first two decades of Gulfside, under the leadership of Bishop Jones, saw this unique property blossom. Most events occurred during the spring and summer months. Some of the activities included the Young Men's Christian Association Conference, the Summer School for Town and Country Pastors, the Summer School of Theology for aspiring ministers, the Boys' Camp and Girls' Reserves, 4-H meetings, scouting events, and picnics sponsored by groups throughout the region.

The summer events culminated with Bishop Jones' Area Council Meeting. The only activity that spanned the entire year during Gulfside's early



Visitors at Gulfside Methodist Assembly



GULFSIDE ASSEMBLY - BISHOPS RESIDENCE - Waveland, Miss.

years was a Poor Boys' School, likely the first and most significant program Bishop Jones personally instituted at Gulfside. In his book, *Black United Methodist Retrospect and Prospect*, Dr. J. H. Graham stated that "[t]his school enables deprived functional illiterates to develop salable skills. Several have gone on and entered the Christian ministry." The students were given classes out of regular public school textbooks and were also taught crafts. Working from 9:00 to 12:00 in the morning, they would attend school until 4:00 pm.

Bishop Jones' tenure at Gulfside, which included the Great Depression, was not without its challenges. Threats of foreclosure were common, but Gulfside always made its payment through penny collections, philanthropists, and the sale of some of its property. While the Assembly was, for the most part, accepted by the local community, there were a few cross burning incidents during its early years. Additionally, while

blacks were allowed on the beach directly in front of the Assembly, they were prohibited from walking elsewhere on the beach and were forced to access the limited beach front by coming through the woods and down through the Assembly property to get to the water

On August 30, 1935, the original Andrew Jackson house on the property caught fire and was heavily damaged. In spite of many rumors the cause was never determined authoritatively. What was left of the Jackson house, as well as certain other buildings on the property, were destroyed by a major hurricane in 1947.

From 1940 to 1944, Bishop William A. C. Hughes oversaw the work at Gulfside. In 1944, Bishop Robert N. Brooks was appointed administrator of Gulfside Assembly. Often called "Mr. Methodist" because of his extraordinary knowledge of church doctrine, Bishop Brooks oversaw the formation of a Board of Trustees so that the burden of Gulfside man-

agement did not rest on the shoulders of one person. Bishop Brooks encouraged people to give dollars rather than pennies. His fund raising efforts helped in the construction of the Brooks Chapel, Gulfside Inn, the Harry Hoosier Auditorium and the Bishop's house on the property. Most of the new construction was cinder block, allowing the buildings to better withstand the "follies of man and nature." The blocks were made on site using a machine that made the blocks one at a time.

Over the next two decades under Bishop Brooks, Gulfside continued to be a focal point for "training youth retreats, jurisdictional meetings, and leadership training enterprises." It was a place where both black and white could come together with much less questioning from the local authorities than would have taken place elsewhere in the South. By the 1950s there were wooden summer cottages as well as two story dormitories to house young people from the "Y-Teens" and other organizations. The pine forest on the back of the grounds contained a complete campground with half log and half screen cabins as well as a large cooking and dining pavilion.

With the formation of the United Methodist Church in 1968, however, progress slowed at Gulfside. Although with this formation came recognized equality for African-American Methodists, the importance of Gulfside began to decrease as a unique core meeting place for blacks on the Gulf Coast. Its im-

portance as a meeting place had not been limited to black Methodists. During the civil rights movement, Gulfside served as an important meeting place as well for others. Hollis Watkins, Civil rights activist of Jackson, said "there were only three places where blacks could meet in Mississippi during the movement—Toogaloo College, Rust College and Gulfside."

With the declining interest in Gulfside and the destruction of Hurricane Camille in 1969, discussions ensued about its possible sale and dividing the proceeds among a number of black colleges. However, under renewed efforts of Bishops Stokes and Dixon and laymen Wayne Calbert and Henry Harper, Gulfside was saved from dissolution. New facilities were built and older and/or damaged facilities were renovated. Included in the new construction were cottages for adults known as Dixon Village.

As with so much else in the area, Hurricane Katrina completely destroyed Gulfside in August of 2005. In spite of the overwhelming loss, Gulfside remains a valuable part of the Coast community. Hosting and partnering with

both the Mississippi Conference Disaster Relief and Community Aid Relief Effort (CARE), this treasured landmark set about serving the needs of the community with work teams branching out helping to rebuild the area.

Rebuilding is also occurring at Gulfside, and the vision is to restore this historic site through a major fundraising effort currently underway. Gulfside has elected to meet this challenge with the same sort of spirit and determination it has met other challenges in its long, rich history. Fittingly, this Hancock County landmark's motto is "We have the unmitigated gall to believe Gulfside is the Mecca on the Gulf!"

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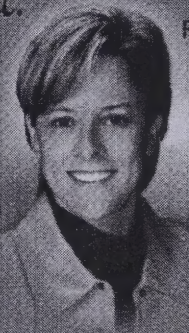
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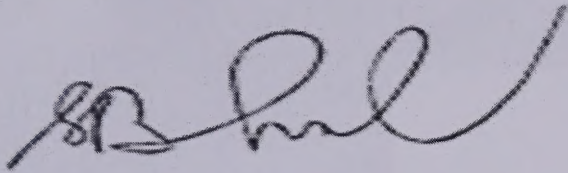
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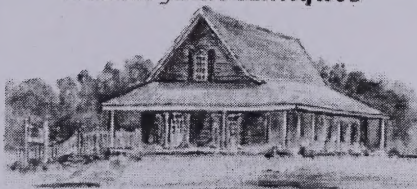
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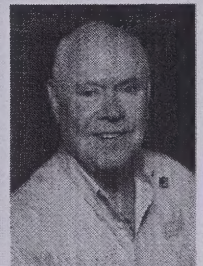
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